TRANSVERSAL SKILLS: A KEY ELEMENT DEVELOPED THROUGH HYBRID LEARNING

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Abstract: To prepare students for the professional world, it is essential to develop their transversal skills at home. In our paper, these skills will be presented: information exploitation, problem solving, critical judgement, creative thinking, use of information technologies, cooperation or appropriate communication. Then an example of how an e-learning module coupled with a face-to-face programme can help develop them will be analysed. We will present the choice of the multimedia task and the elements of analysis of surveys carried out with the students who have followed this module at Warsaw University's Institute of Romance philology. We intend to show that even if the tool actually pushes the development of transversal skills, it would remain insufficient on its own.

Keywords: blended learning, transversal skills, multimedia, foreign language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

In her speech to the OECD on November 14, 2016, during the week of education, the now former French Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem recalled several key points that underlie the problem we are addressing in this article, that is, preparing our learners for the job market. Quoting the American prospectivist Thomas Frey who announced that "60% of the jobs of the next 10 years have not yet been invented", she called for a development of "these skills that require learning to learn, skills that allow people to learn, adapt ". The minister also reminded that all "digital natives", a term used by Prensky (2001), who are our students, this expression did not correspond to a reality to the extent that having grown up with the new technologies did not entail a true mastery of the latter. We could therefore rather call them "digital naives" (Hargittai, 2010). Finally, she stressed the importance of teaching our students to "seek, to approach the Internet with a critical and demanding spirit". These skills underlined by the minister are in fact part of a larger group, often referred as to "transversal skills".

This development of skills is at the heart of foreign language teaching following a paradigm shift that has already begun with the communicative approach, then the action-oriented approach, moving from a paradigm of knowledge and simplification, to that of the competence and complexity evoked by Claire Bourguignon (2006: 59). Thus, with CEFR, foreign language teaching is firmly in an empowering approach of the learner. Developing these skills will require an environment where the student can experiment, face by himself problems, where he can manage his time and can look for information. The classroom is too limited for that because of the resources it offers, or the timeframe required, and that is why e-learning becomes the best place to develop these skills. In the first part of this article, we will present these transversal skills, and the way e-learning can be used to develop them. In the second part, we will analyse the results of research conducted from October 2010 to June 2015 showing the use of a blended learning module to help in their development.

1. PREPARING FOR THE MODERN JOB MARKET: TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

Although for language teaching CEFR essentially puts forward so-called "general" competences, including know-how, another type of skills gradually emerges in teaching programmes and corresponds precisely to the skills mentioned by Najat Vallaud-Belkacem in her speech: transversal skills. Coming from the world of business, this type of skills prepares students for today's ever-changing world characterised by the flow of content and information (Crouzet, 2012: 10) and that is why they have been already implemented in many countries.

In the US, some of them have been grouped under the term of 4C's (Partnership for 21st century Learning) since 2002 standing for: collaboration, critical thinking, creativity and communication. Since 2007, the transversal skills have been described in the Belgian curriculum as: to be aware, to manage scholar tools, to manage time, memorise, comply with a statement, sum up, auto evaluate, use tools for work. Since January 2017 they have been grouped under the name "soft skills" (Becquet & Etienne, 2016) and taught in Australian institutions, regrouping: ICT, creative and critical thinking, personal and social aptitudes (group working and working in diversity), ethical aptitudes (understanding values and identifying them at others) as well as the intercultural competence. However, the notion of transversal skills has already been present since the 1990s in Quebec (where they are now referred to as "certain skills"), and the definition given by the Canadian MELS seems to us the most complete. It groups transversal skills into four categories.

The first category includes four intellectual skills to be gained by the learner:

- Exploiting information: this is the competence that enables the quest for information to be systematised, the appropriation of information, and to know how to profit from it,

- Solving problems: and thus know how to analyse the elements of a given situation, to test possible solutions and to know how to adopt a flexible functioning (with a return on the stages crossed and the recovery of some of them if necessary),

- Exercising his critical judgement: this transversal competence is that allowing the construction of an opinion, the expression of the latter as well as its relativisation,

- implementing his creative thinking: the learner must know how to immerse himself in the elements of a situation, engage in exploration and adopt a flexible functioning.

The second category, methodological, has two cross-curricular competencies:

- Acquiring efficient working methods: this includes the ability to visualise the task as a whole, regulate the process and analyse it,

- exploiting information and communication technologies: this transversal competence, which is fundamental here, includes the use of appropriate technologies, the ability to benefit from the use of technology and the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of this use. On that aspect, the use of an e-learning environment makes totally sense.

The third category also has two skills and is at the personal and social level for the learner:

- to actualise his potential: the learner must know how to recognise his personal characteristics, take his place among others and use his personal resources,

- to cooperate: this competence is that through which the learner contributes to the collective work, benefits from it and interacts with open-mindedness in different contexts.

The last skill is communicative:

- the ability to communicate appropriately: the learner must know how to appropriately use various languages, use various modes of communication and manage his communication.

We see it here, the development of these skills is closely related to the development of the learner and concerns all spheres of evolution that can determine a proximal area of development: intellectual, personal, methodological and communicative. These skills are crucial in modern life in order to adapt to the always-changing world and be able to mobilise all resources available around in an efficient way.

In foreign language learning, transversal skills might be mistaken for what is called "key competencies". The latter are global competencies required for the general development of the learner. Transversal skills are indeed a huge plus in this development but are not necessarily required.

2. HYBRID LEARNING: AN ENVIRONMENT AND A TOOL TO DEVELOP TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

In a foreign language curriculum, the place available for transversal skills is there. However, the classic frame of a language class is often not suitable. Indeed, working on these skills requires a lot of time, individual and collaborative work, personalisation, equipment: elements which put together might suffer from the limits of the classroom. That is why another frame for work is required: e-learning coupled to the classroom. Inside a Learning Management System, students are put in a semi-controlled environment, where the limits can be looser than in a class.

Three limitations of the classroom can be erased by using an e-learning module: time, content as well as the degree of autonomy and personalisation. All these three elements are totally linked. More time allows more complex tasks and bigger or more complex content. More time also allows more autonomy on working on the complex content and in the choice of tools to solve the problems.

Working on most of the transversal skills will take a lot of time, which then cannot be used for elements of language learning. If we take the example of "exploiting information", depending on the difficulty, at the beginning this can take a long time if the students are lacking techniques. The interest of having time is to leave them in autonomy and let them experiment different ways to look for the information and use it in an efficient way. The student does less feel the time limit for his search. Having more time also allows to confront students to more complex problems and make these more interesting. Another consequence is that "acquisition of efficient working methods" is also pushed. As previously underlined, when we talk about the transversal skill "exploiting information and communication technologies", the use of e-learning seems an obvious solution. Using a LMS pushes the students in using ICT at a maximum. It also allows the students to use both "classical" solutions such as books and technological solutions. If autonomy is enhanced, collaborative work is too: during the timeframe given, nothing stops the student to ask for help around and to share methods and information.

3. AN EXAMPLE OF ENVIRONMENT TO WORK ON TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

In 2010, the Institute of Romance philology started to recruit students having no knowledge of French. Therefore, a specific program had to be created in order that

these students could reach the level required for the licence exam which is common for all groups. Within three years it is impossible to give students all the required elements, which is why autonomy in learning, techniques and skills in general will have a key influence on the studies. Thus, the student must acquire the skills to look by himself for the elements he needs. Doing so, he must be critical toward what he finds, and then combine the information he found with what he already knows in order to solve his problem. This has precisely been the goal of the e-learning module: not something about grammar, not about vocabulary, nor about the culture as a goal. These three components of the language are, of course, present but were mainly a pretext to show how transversal skills can help students in solving problems in language learning.

The module was composed of 14 groups of activities for the first year and of 5 tasks for the second year. Students were given around two weeks to complete each group of activities or task. They could modify their answers up to the deadline and use whatever means to reach the goals. The content was with a progressive level of difficulty but was not at all coordinated with the lessons they had in class: the module was fully independent.

The period of activity observed about which we will present here some results and comments was from April 2013 to February 2015.

The main transversal skills we targeted were: how to structure a text with what the student knows, his critical judgement; techniques to look for information and time management. The use of ICT was again obvious as the student was on a LMS. To this we also included cultural elements for the cultural competence.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Researchers` evaluation of transversal skills use during e learning course

The table 1 below presents our own appreciation of the requirements by skill for the first year. At first text structuration was low as the students were full beginners. Of course, these figures are quite subjective, but they are to show what importance was given to each skill. Focus was less also put on time management at the beginning as the activities proposed were at first requiring less time to be completed. In the first year, 10 to 15 activities were grouped around a topic or a point of grammar. Some of the activities were gaps to be filled with vocabulary, some were requiring short written answers and others were multiple choice items. The type of documents on which the activities were based were various: pictures, videos, texts, internet links to sites. This was done in order different searching techniques were needed to answer. To train the critical judgement, some traps for various tools were set, purposely to mislead the student. For instance, in an activity about sport the word "raquette" for tennis was to be translated and the Polish word "rakieta" was given. Students not critical to what they found would translate it by "roquette" or "fusée" both meaning "rocket" in English. Another activity presented

the picture of some musketeers and the question was "what sport did the four musketeers practice?" The right answer was "tennis", and the ones not critical would answer "fencing".

<div align="right">**Table 1.**</div>

Presence of work on transversal skills and cultural competence in the group of activities for the first year of studies (scale from 1- never to 4 very often)

Name of the group of activities	Transversal skills and cultural competence				
	Text structuration	Critical judgement	Information seeking	Time management	Cultural elements
1.1- Pays et nationalités	1	3	3	2	1
1.2- Chiffres	1	2	3	2	2
1.3- Articles 1	1	3	4	2	1
1.4- Articles 2	1	4	4	2	4
1.5- Verbes	1	4	4	3	3
1.6- A table!	1	4	4	3	4
1.7- Logements	2	3	4	3	3
1.8- Le corps	3	4	4	3	4
1.9- Positions et directions	3	3	4	3	2
2.1- Le sport	3	3	4	3	4
2.2- Les loisirs	3	3	4	3	3
2.3- Le cinéma	4	3	4	3	4
2.4- La France ailleurs	4	4	4	4	4
2.5- La métropole	4	4	4	4	4
average	**2,3**	**3,4**	**3,9**	**2,9**	**3,1**

Source: Own work

During the second year, students were able to make more complex written answers, which is why the requirement for text structuration was increased. Work on critical judgement was considered being already mainly done during the first year, but they were still traps set. More information seeking was needed, and the information was more complex to find in order to increase the efficiency of the techniques used. There were no more groups of activities but tasks: a goal had to be achieved thanks to different activities in the task, which were the steps to help reach the goal. Time

management remained crucial as the tasks were requiring between 3 to 4 hours of work according to most of the students. Content used included more videos in original language but also with different accents and were longer than in the activities for the first year. Original texts and pictures were used as well as audio recordings (Table 2).

Table 2.

Presence of work on transversal skills and cultural competence in the tasks for the second year of studies (scale from 1- never to 4 very often).

	Transversal skills and cultural competence				
Name of the tasks	*Text structuration*	Critical judgement	Information seeking	Time management	Cultural elements
Task 1 - Ma cabane au Canada	4	2	4	4	4
Task 2 - J'ai la frite!	4	4	4	4	4
Task 3- Afriqu'art	4	2	4	4	4
Task 4- Assistant en Suisse	3	2	4	4	4
Task 5- On recrute	4	3	4	4	4
average	3,8	2,6	4,0	4,0	4,0

Source: Own work

4.2. Students evaluations of transversal skills use during e-course

At the end of each year, an anonymous survey questionnaire was sent to students. Among the questions was one on a Likert scale about their feeling about transversal skills. The tables 3 and 4 below gathers the results on the covered period (April 2013 to February 2015). Again, this is based on impressions and these results are subjective, but they do reflect the feeling students had. That is why we will here make only careful suppositions but not draw conclusions.

For the first year (Table 3), we can notice that about how the module helped them on text structuration, students felt it did not help much. This result is more than logical as we explained that this skill was barely touched as they are beginners. However, it seems that students did not feel the work on critical judgement. This might be because they did not see the traps or did simply not feel they were critical when choosing the information. At this point we can only suppose as no questions were asked on the details. The help for information seeking techniques was the most felt by students.

Table 3.

How important was the help for the development of skills thanks to the module according to the 1st year students (scale from 1=not at all to 4=a lot, n=73).

Skill	1	2	3	4	avevage
Text structuration	8	12	40	13	2,8
Information seeking	3	6	18	46	3,5
Critical judgement	8	19	30	16	2,7
Cultural elements	2	9	24	38	3,3

Source: Own work

On the second year (Table 4), although there was quite a strong requirement for longer and structured written answers, students did not feel a big help on this skill. Students even felt more help for critical judgement skill than text structuration. Feeling on how it helped for information seeking is similar to the first year, we must, however, remember that students already gained some techniques during the first year and might then have acquired new or strengthened the ones they possessed. The feeling on cultural content is stronger because all the tasks were heavily culturally oriented: A student exchange in Quebec, a presentation to do on Belgium, a Francophone African art contest, a job in Switzerland and a job interview to work in France.

Table 4.

How important was the help for the development of skills thanks to the module according to the 2nd year students (scale from 1=not at all to 4=a lot, n=58).

Skill	1	2	3	4	avevage
Text structuration	5	17	21	15	2,8
Information seeking	3	5	14	36	3,4
Critical judgement	4	10	25	19	3
Cultural elements	0	2	10	46	3,8

Source: Own work

As for time management for both years, we only asked the students how long the realisation of the elements took them. In the first year, answers were mainly "between one and two hours" (58%, 42 persons out of n=73). For the second year it took more time as the tasks were more complex: 52% (30 out of n=58) answered "between two to three hours" and 33% (19 out of n=58) "over three hours". When we analysed the activity of each group of activities and tasks, the result was almost

always the same: a pike of activity just the day before and on the day of the deadline. Meaning most students did the work at the last minute.

The last question of the questionnaire which was "the work on the platform contributed to the development of your skills in French language", gave quite positive answers: in the first year 52% answered "I rather agree" (38 persons out of n=73) and 31% "I fully agree" (23 persons out of n=73). For the second year, 57% (33 persons out of n=58) answered "I rather agree" and 17% (10 persons out of n=58) "I fully agree".

CONCLUSIONS

These results are encouraging us to think that the module was useful and did indeed help the students to increase their transversal skills, except maybe time management where some better ideas are to be found. This last element shows that this tool is not enough by itself. These skills will be used later not only for language learning but for all kinds of professional occupation that might appear. In our opinion, it is critical to prepare our students for the economic and social world, and working on transversal skills is of crucial importance. To this end, the help of an LMS seemed to us the best way to help to achieve this goal.

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